Something Lessing Said: A Commentary on *Journeys of the Popes*

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi

Translated by Dale E. Snow

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) first came to public notice with his philosophical novels, Allwills Briefsammlung *(1774) and* Woldemar *(1779), and secured his reputation as a leading critic of the Enlightenment with his* Briefe über die Lehre von Spinoza *(1785), the book that launched the Pantheism Controversy. Jacobi criticized the Enlightenment for what he regarded as its exaggerated claims for the primacy of reason and argued that a completely consistent rationalism—exemplified for him by Spinoza—would necessarily culminate in atheism, determinism, and nihilism. From his reading of David Hume, Jacobi concluded that reason could not even attain certainty about the existence of external objects and hence that our experience of the world ultimately rests on a revelation that is completely beyond argument, which he termed "faith."*

It is often assumed that those who, like Jacobi or Hamann, questioned the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment were reactionaries in their political thinking. Jacobi's 1782 essay "Something Lessing Said" demonstrates how his skepticism about the powers of reason, when coupled with the arguments of such representatives of the civic republican tradition in politics as Machiavelli and Ferguson, could produce a spirited articulation of the principles of political liberalism.

> Dic cur hic? respice finem!
> *Which Leibniz translated as:*
> Où en sommes nous? venons au fait!
> NOUVEAUX ESSAIS, P. 155[1]

This I heard Lessing say: the statements of Febronius and his followers were a shameless flattery of the princes; for all their arguments against the privileges of the pope were either groundless or applied with double and triple force to the princes themselves.[2] Everyone was capable of grasping this; and the fact that no one among the many whose urgent business it would be to

Originally published as Etwas das Lessing gesagt hat: Ein Commentar zu den Reisen der Päpste *(Berlin, 1782). This translation is based on the version Jacobi edited for the second volume of his collected works, which shortens some of the notes and moves some material originally found in footnotes to the text itself.*

point this out has yet said so publicly, with all the incisiveness and precision such a subject permitted and deserved, was odd enough and an extremely bad sign.

Someone finally said it, and loudly enough to be heard by everyone, although not in so many words. For this reason, many may not have been able to extract the larger meaning from his work (I mean the *Journeys of the Popes*),[3] since it appears that we Germans are generally too wrapped up in our profundity to listen nimbly and swiftly. Others will take pains not to grasp its true spirit, but will rather fasten onto the outer husk, in order—with an outcry—to pillory it, and let their hordes drag it through the mud.

Germans will do this to a man who spoke out for German freedom—for humanity's most priceless privilege—without being a German.[4] Yet he does not stand alone. There are still men among us who are fighting for the same cause. Who would not name as first among them our Justus Möser,[5] *advocatum patriae*, who alone in all Germany spoke an emphatic word, when everywhere only jubilation resounded because of the great deed involving the miller Arnold.[6] The passage, in the essay "On German Language and Literature," is well known.[7] Less known is an earlier article, occasioned by just this incident, with the title "On the Important Difference between Real and Formal Law." It says, among other things:

> All men may err, a king just as much as a philosopher, and the latter perhaps first, since they both stand too high, and cannot calmly and precisely observe any one of the many things which pass before their eyes. For this reason all nations have made it the foundation of their freedom and property, that what a person recognizes as law or truth shall never be permitted to be law until it has received the seal of formalism.
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> It belongs to the form of law that it be pronounced by a legitimate judge, and that it be in force. This is a fundamental law on which all European nations are in agreement as well, and the monarch who bids compliance to a *real* truth just as he does to a *formal* one overthrows this first and fundamental law, holy to every state, without which there is no more security. Even the wisdom of Solomon cannot excuse such an undertaking, since all the wisdom in the world leads only to real (natural, substantial, internal) truth, not to formal (positive, established, external) truth.[8]

The great mass of our thinkers are least able to think this, because they want to see the essentially true and the essentially good spread *by power* [*Gewalt*], and want to see every error suppressed *by power*. They would like to help promote an enlightenment—elsewhere than in the understanding, because that takes too long. They put out the lights, filled with childish impatience for it to be day. Oh hope-filled darkness, in which we hurriedly totter our way toward the goal of our wishes, toward the greatest good on earth; forward, on the path of violence and subjugation!

But power, wherever it was in the world, whether apportioned among

several or vested only in one—reigning power, whether established or arbitrary, predetermines and restricts every other cognition on the path to insight as well as every drive [*Trieb*] on the path to happiness—such a power, which only gives laws and itself has none, and which may violate the holiest laws with holiness, has never brought forth *real truth and genuine well-being* anywhere among men. However, much good has originated from the *resistance against it*, out of the original spirit of freedom, out of the externally active drive of reason to enlarge itself and spread its insight over everything. Where there is history, there is also testimony that when great deeds, inclinations, and thoughts, the works of noble men, and noble men themselves did not arise directly out of the kernel of freedom, they at least drew sap from its trunk, like a grafted branch—or stood forlorn like second growth from the roots of the fallen tree. And where there is history, there is also testimony that unrestricted arbitrary power has produced only stupidity and vice, everything that is despicable, unworthy, and small, and that it is incapable of achieving even its own foolish ends.

However, it is obvious that power (and especially a power that is omnipresent and ubiquitous), that a certain compulsion, and certain means to enforce it are absolutely necessary among men. For if the lack of restraint of only a few has already such a deleterious effect on the species, what would happen if all were unrestrained? The extent to which such institutions are truly necessary for humanity, the causes of this necessity and its necessary object, what these institutions ought and ought not to do, what they are and are not capable of doing: this important knowledge can only be drawn from knowledge of man's innermost nature. A close examination of what is peculiar to this nature may help us to form fruitful conclusions.

What distinguishes man from animals and shapes his particular species is the capacity to see a relationship among ends and to guide his conduct by this insight.

Out of this source of humanity flows, in all its tributaries, the same reason [*Vernunft*], only overflowing beds and between banks of immense diversity and size and hiding its efflux from all eyes. These beds, these banks are the passions. Many have wanted to see it differently, and—against all appearances and arguments—have taken reason for the banks and the passions for the stream.

Insofar as man is determined in and by himself—that is, insofar as he is capable of acting freely—to that extent he is motivated by reason, and to that extent he is fully human. Where there is no freedom, no *self-determination*, there is no humanity.

Insofar as man is affected by things outside him and he views them in such a way that his awareness of himself disappears—to that extent he is acting according to a foreign drive and not according to his own. He allows

himself to be determined, and he does not determine himself. He does what is demanded by other things and not what his own nature requires. And to that extent we say he is moved by *passion* and that he is only an animal.

A civil society is a human society and not an animal one. It is an institution of reason and not of the passions, a means of freedom and not of slavery, constituted for beings who by nature stand in the middle between the two.

For itself, reason never has need of the passions, which only darken and restrict it. It can thus never command a passion as such, nor make the stimulation of a passion an immediate goal for itself. However, the circumstances of human nature can well force reason to attempt to inhibit or stop one passion by means of another. Since it is incapable of controlling every external impression, it must, in defense of its freedom, set external power against external power.

If reason can never have the promotion of a passion for an immediate goal, and a civil compact arises only through reason—although not without taking the passions into account but *absolutely in relation to them*—then those societies among men which are based on the promotion of passions cannot, *to that extent*, be seen as rational institutions, or as civil societies, or as truly *human* societies.

We also see animals, united by common drives, living with one another in society; yet even this is not a product of passion, for in animals, as in men, passions are far more likely to set the individual members against one another than to bind them to one another, and thus must necessarily produce the opposite of society, that is, that state *in quo vis et dolus sunt virtutes cardinales*.[9] That which unites social animals is *instinct* [*Instinct*], which is clearly distinguished from the nature of the passions [*Leidenschaften*]. And by means of this wonderful agency these animal societies receive a much higher degree of perfection than those human ones which rest more on the basis of passion than reason. For instinct is unalterable and sure and is quite similar to reason in that it demands nothing other than what is obviously the best for one and all, who are bound to one another in pursuit of a common goal.

Now the question arises: Is there a means of reason which, like instinct among social animals, can lead men securely, unalterably, and manifestly to the point where the good of all and the good of each individual are incontrovertibly joined: is there such a means, and what is its name?

Let us examine the matter more closely and the means will be found, along with its name.

Obviously reason is the proper, true life of our nature, the soul of the spirit, the cord which binds together all our powers, an image of the eternal unalterable source of all truth, of all being that perceives itself and takes pleasure in itself. Without reason, it would be impossible for us to do other than to act at odds with ourselves; we would belong more to external things

than to ourselves. In reason, we are at one with ourselves, in that among all our *desires*[10] a contract arises, in harmony with the eternal laws of what is advantageous to our enduring nature. Each of our desires has the most legitimate claim to be satisfied, so that virtue consists in the greatest possible unification of all our desires, and true happiness consists in the greatest possible satisfaction of all of them—whereby both become the same thing. The longing for happiness is no more common than the conviction that it can only be found on the path of reason, because reason always reliably commands that which is good for the whole man, that is, that which is truly best for all his parts.

That it is good for the whole man to bind himself to others like himself is a truth obvious to everyone since, on the one hand, nothing in the entire realm of nature can be as useful to him and, on the other, nothing in the entire realm of nature can harm him to so high a degree as another person.

Men who act under the impetus of reason are never harmful to one another, for from this impetus no action can arise which would be in opposition to the action of anyone else who acts according to this very impetus. Rather, every individual, in that he promotes his own true best interest, also necessarily promotes the best interest of all others, and is full of love for them.

Men are thus in a position to cause mutual harm only to the extent that they are motivated by passions, from which develop all conflicts, the entire horde of vices, and not a single real virtue.

If, in every case, the impetus of passion is stronger in men, and for this reason—as two of the greatest scholars have maintained (Hobbes and Spinoza)—man can be seen as the natural and worst enemy of other men, man nevertheless strives solely toward the good with all his *particular, innermost* capacities, so that man everywhere follows the laws of the love of humanity, of justice, of honor, and of religion with unabated zeal, insofar as he is determined *solely* by his *own* nature.

It follows from this, as from what has been pointed out above, that it would be impossible for *formal legislation*, or a *system of coercion*, to apply to man insofar as he has the gift of reason and is already determined through this reason to promote his well-being and that of his fellow men. Rather, it applies only to the extent that he is in the grip of the passions and therefore inclined to injustice, inclined to break with others and with himself, unstable, unfaithful, eager for discord and quarrel.

Thus society, insofar as it rests on *external form* and is a *mechanism of coercion*, has *protection* as its one and only object, that is, to ward off from every member of the society every harm that might arise out of injustice; or, in the same way, to secure for every member his inviolable property in his person, the free use of all his powers, and the full enjoyment of the fruits of their employment.

Accordingly, the means by which man could be securely, unalterably, and manifestly led—just as the social animals are led by instinct—to the point where the good of all and the good of each individual are incontrovertibly joined would be security of property in the broadest sense and absolutely in the highest degree, for all as for one, and for one as for all, *inviolable universal justice, without any compulsion to any other end.*

Should anyone argue against us that these means would not lead to the highest goal of the civil condition, but rather that there are other ends whose means, in cases of conflict, should supersede the means of inviolable, universal justice, let him dare to name, in clear words, these ends and means. He will not know of any which do not obviously arise from the passions: lust for land, lust for money—vanity, concupiscence, and pride. And then he would have to maintain that the promotion of these passions—ambition, greed, all the sensual desires—is more appropriate to the vocation and happiness of man than the promotion of reason and its consequences: true insight, moderation, justice, health of the soul, enduring satisfaction, and virtue itself.

There are many other things he would also have to claim, which are not things anyone would want to claim in so many words, and which cannot even be clearly conceived. It is certainly well enough meant by most, when they allow themselves to dream of a certain *interest of the state,* of a certain welfare of the *whole,* which is not the welfare of all its parts, but rather is distinguished from this in that a disproportionate sacrifice from the parts for the sake of the whole can be reasonably conceived and justly demanded from them. However, should these gentlemen scrutinize matters, even if only from a distance, they would discover without much effort that this effusive interest, suspended dimly before them, resolves itself into a purely geographical interest, namely, this one: *that a certain number of square feet of land should be found together under a certain name.* And they would find, these good men—doubtless to their hearty satisfaction!—that for the sake of such a geographical interest, in order to preserve it or increase it, and for no other end, they would give up some of their property, any part of their external freedom, yes, by hundreds and thousands, even life itself. They would find that there are no such parts of a whole which have the ground of their union in itself, a whole, whose unity resides within itself. Rather they would find that they are parts which are together only for the sake of another, parts of a thing whose unity is found outside of it—parts of a blind instrument, of an artificial but unreasoning body, *without a soul of its own.*

In no area of human knowledge does there reign greater confusion and contradiction than in this one. It is acknowledged that every commonwealth must be administered in accordance with the laws of justice; and at the same time it is claimed that these laws cannot be determined, that they are arbitrary, obedient to chance, and need not shrink from injustice. But since

by nature it is impossible to be fully justified in coercing what one may be fully justified in refusing, a supreme unrestricted authority must step in, to turn the natural laws around as required—*by force.*

Indeed, the prevailing concept of authority [*Obrigkeit*] is that it is in and of itself the source of justice and property—not the source of the *secure possession* of property, but rather the source of property *itself.* Hence it has to determine the extent and the limit of all the varieties of property, and all of its uses according to indeterminable principles, at most according to a certain indeterminate general good, which authority, quite indeterminately again, is found to know and to strive for.

Who would care to untangle all that is nonsensical in these ideas, and who wants to see it merely untangled? It is better that I hasten to add a few brief points for the clarification and confirmation of my own thoughts.

This was my point of departure: that power must only be countered by power, crime by coercion. The essence of both is not to give rise to actions, but rather to eliminate and to hinder them. They are not in the position to awaken powers, or to create anything that is good in itself. That which is good in itself can only spring from itself, and its original source is always *the unbidden inner movement of a free spirit.*

Without power and coercion men first became brothers and formed societies, where the absence of faulty arrangements gave them more security than many artificial institutions, which often cause more and worse crimes than they prevent. Man is active out of sheer inclination [*Triebe*], and he must be just because he wants to be happy. Kindness and love, discernment, fairness, generosity, courage, and loyalty, these qualities, which constitute the bond and the strength of societies, are original qualities of his nature, immediately bestowed by God. True, the arts of government have exercised the minds of men and, giving rise to all kinds of efforts, inquiries, goals, wishes, and thoughts, enriched their spirit; but they have often also degraded and worsened it. For they have promoted every sort of inequality, privilege, division, and vanity, and, by overburdening the individual with ever new objects of care for himself, they have replaced the trust and goodwill one ought to feel toward one's fellow creatures with an anxious effort to be concerned only with one's own person. However, the happiest men are those whose hearts stand in connection to a community which shares all their wishes and from which they can separate none of their wishes, with a community in which they find every object of magnanimity and ardor and find an end for every talent and virtuous inclination. Animals have sagacity enough to procure their food, and to find the means of their solitary pleasures; but it is reserved for man to advise, to persuade, to oppose, to wax enthusiastic in the society of his fellow creatures, and to lose the sense of his personal interest or safety, in the ardor of his friendships and his oppositions.

Ferguson, in whose words I was just speaking,[11] warns very much of the political refinements of ordinary men who have only repose or inactivity as their objects and which are intended to destroy the noblest activity by means of restrictions aimed at the prevention of bad action—as if the common man had no right to act or even to think. He mentions in this connection the quip of a great prince who sought to make ridiculous the concern that judges in a free country be held to an exact interpretation of the law and then tries as much as possible to alleviate the anxiety of certain people when they find, instead of unbounded submissiveness, indignant demands for rights, as well as failings of policy [*Polizey*]. He tries to do it by asking them to contemplate how a Chinaman might think that the freedom men have in Europe to wander here and there in the streets and fields at will is a sure sign of coming confusion and anarchy: "Can men behold their superior and not tremble? Can they converse without a precise and written ceremonial? What hopes of peace, if the streets are not barricaded at an hour? What wild disorder, if men are permitted in anything to do what they please?"[12]

"Certainly," he says further, "the viper must be held at a distance, and the tyger chained. But if a rigorous policy, applied to enslave, not to restrain from crimes, has an actual tendency to corrupt the manners, and to extinguish the spirit of nations; if its severities be applied to terminate the agitations of a free people, not to remedy their corruptions; if forms be often applauded as salutary, because they tend merely to silence the voice of mankind, or be condemned as pernicious, because they allow this voice to be heard; we may expect that many of the boasted improvements of civil society will be mere devices to lay the political spirit at rest, and will chain up the active virtues more than the restless disorders of men."[13]

What is noble has always been placed in opposition to the mechanical, not just where art is distinguished from handicraft, but rather in all things, and in the following way: one thinks of spiritual activity in the one case, and of mere physical activity in the other; of nobility of sense and ability in the one, and of selfishness and external need in the other; of freedom and self-determination in the one, and of slavery and alien motivation in the other. To confuse and gradually to eliminate these differences could be called the great mission of our time. Gladly would we see all self-determination, all unmediated original power of movement eliminated from nature; gladly would we create life only out of things which have no life, and generate fresh action from pure suffering. Gladly would we renounce all that is spiritual, all that is original, all that exists and acts through itself—in order to introduce in their place gears, weights, and levers. Of our political condition in particular, a wise man still living says:[14] "If men had expressly undertaken to form a society in which as little religion and as little virtue as possible were to be found, they could not possibly have done any better

than has in fact happened here. What we have left of virtue and religion," he continues, "we have thanks to the circumstance that lawmakers, in the building of their machine, found that they could not do without this power for movement of one of the main wheels. However, the nature of this religion and virtue do not matter any further to them, if only it does not interfere with the uniform movement of their great clockwork."[15]

Where virtue and religion are no longer felt, or are even denied, there remains no other means to secure the general welfare than to bring the self-seeking partisan tendencies of the members of the society—that is, their passions—into equilibrium. This can only be effected by the utmost power, and even then in an extremely inadequate manner. Since the passions by their nature are lawless, changeable, and of endlessly variable effect, so too the means which serve to hold the self-seeking and personal tendencies in check only through themselves—without awakening any noble sentiments—must be unrestricted and left to *arbitrary choice* [*Willkür*] in response to the indeterminate events of the moment. But arbitrary choice leaves room for error, and unrestricted power allows the suppression of all rights, so that it is precisely the defect requiring such aid that renders its misuse unavoidable. We also see, from one end of history to the other, among such peoples—where out of a combination of mere passions all the virtues were supposed to arise, virtues in the service of these passions, or rather *unpunished vices*—that it is precisely through these means, intended as they were to deal with misdeeds, the outbreak of general adversity, and total ruin, that all these evils were always only made greater and finally driver to the highest pitch. We see incontrovertibly that men who are not themselves in the position to know what is good for them and to strive for it are even less able to owe their well-being to the virtue of a guardian who is without a judge and who will never allow them to achieve maturity.[16] We see that to prevent peoples by force from acting to their own detriment, or really to force them into what is best for them, a god would have to descend, a perfect individual who would never die.

Imperfect creatures like ourselves, only even more strongly tempted by all things evil, among whom a conceit, which drives all wisdom away, and an arrogance, which wishes to rule over justice and truth itself and to elevate itself above all duties, fill the whole soul and make tyranny, for them, the greatest of the goddesses[17]—such creatures are indeed often powerful enough to thwart the satisfaction of our passions, but not for our own best interests, but instead so that we might serve *their* passions instead of our own. If they have wisdom, they can also justly claim the title of *shepherd of their people;* for they provide them with good pastures, growth, and prosperity; they protect them within a secure enclosure; they chain up guard dogs for them, and gird themselves for the watch, like Eumaeus in Homer.[18] Only the herd must not wish to belong to itself, nor must any part of it go

beyond its boundaries, or the whip sings and stings and the guard dog is unleashed.—But the advancement of humanity, of its highest joys, its sublimest pleasures, its power and dignity, are never to be expected from one of us who wishes to rule autocratically. Rather one should expect the advancement of all those tendencies that destroy the strength of the soul, the grandeur of the spirit, the nobility of the mind, and all true inner superiority and glory. One should expect the advancement of self-interest, money-grubbing, indolence; of a stupid admiration of wealth, of rank, and of power; a blind unsavory submissiveness; and an anxiety and fear which allows no zeal and tends toward the most servile obedience. "This is the manner of government," says the great and noble Ferguson, "into which the covetous and the arrogant, to satiate their unhappy desires, would hurry their fellow creatures: it is a manner of government to which the timorous and servile submit at discretion; and when these characters of the rapacious and the timid divide mankind, even the virtues of Antonius or Trajan, can do no more than apply, with candor and with vigor, the whip and the sword; and endeavor, by the hopes of reward, or the fear of punishment, to find a speedy and a temporary cure for the crimes, or the imbecilities of men.—Other states may be more or less corrupted; *this has corruption for its basis.* Here justice may sometimes direct the arm of the despotical sovereign; but the name of justice is most commonly employed to signify the interest, or the caprice, of a reigning power. Human society, susceptible of such a variety of forms, here finds the simplest of all. The toils and possessions of many are destined to asswage the passions of one or a few, and the only parties that remain among mankind, are the oppressor who demands, and the oppressed, who dare not refuse."[19]

If it is true, that despotism (why do we not call things by their right names?) does not only deprive men of their best qualities but also does not even permit them afterwards to fulfill their lower wishes, if this is absolutely grounded in the nature of things, then I would like to hear the name of that evil which must be remedied by *the greatest of all evils*, or the advantage which could balance it. The advantage of a better defense against outside enemies—if it could be maintained against the abundance of contradictory examples—counts for too little, since the inner enemy is the worst. I have no constitution to defend in which I may watch over my own rights and protect them myself: and thus I have no freedom and no *fatherland.* My *place of birth* always remains; and perhaps I will gain more from my new master than I lose; in any case no very great disadvantages can arise for me.

We must not overlook an important observation. Namely this: that despotism is capable of assuming very different forms, and that it can be found in *every* constitution to a greater or lesser extent. Here, observed from inside, at its source, it first arouses the greatest disgust. This inner nature cannot be elaborated from out of itself any more than the inner nature of anything

evil, any error or vice can be elaborated out of itself. Rather, it must be observed in its opposite, in that of which it is the deficiency. The opposite of despotism is the rule of freedom. Free, in the highest degree, would be he who is determined in his actions by himself alone, consequently he who himself immediately brought all his objects into being—which can be said of no creature conscious of itself only by means of representations and striving after objects which are not in his power. God alone is free in this absolute sense. But free—in his fashion to the very highest degree—is every person and every citizen, insofar as he is not prevented from furthering his own true advantage in every way in his power. Everyone is a slave, insofar as he is prevented in any way from furthering his own true advantage.

I said every *man* and every *citizen*, because the explanation given here is general, and applies to inner moral freedom as well as to external political freedom.

Both are very closely connected: for it is impossible (as has already frequently been alluded to in this essay) for men who are not already very deeply sunken into moral slavery to fall into political slavery, unless it takes place by a sudden conquest. The political slavery of a people is therefore at the same time a sign of its moral slavery, and just as the latter is exclusively grounded in the animal nature of man, so is the former which arises from it. Both aim at making man ever more of an animal—that is: corrupting him from the ground up.

The same connection holds between the two species of freedom. Where there is a high degree of political freedom in fact, not just in appearance, there must be no less a degree of moral freedom present. Both are grounded exclusively in the rational nature of man, and their power and effect is thus to make men ever more human, ever more capable of self-government, of ruling their passions, of being happy and without fear.

Where there are no laws, there is no commonwealth, thus no civic freedom. Where arbitrary laws take hold, there is, so far as these are in force, again no civic freedom; and every law is arbitrary which is not a necessary consequence of the unalterable eternal laws of nature. The enduring implicit agreement of all members of the society can be maintained only by such formal laws which are manifest consequences of the laws of nature. They alone contain what is to the obvious benefit of each and all, and cannot contain anything from which the least harm for a rational creature might ever arise. Where public certainty of the common advantage ceases, there too ceases the warrant of the laws and the system of freedom.

Most people have taken other points of view in the examination of political freedom, so that usually it comes down only to the question of whether it is more bearable to submit to the arbitrary power of one individual, of a certain number out of the many, or to the many itself—that is, which vari-

ety of despotism would be the best. This question is not really worthy of a wise man's attention.

For this reason, however, a great deal of virtue, a great deal of moral freedom must be present where much true political freedom is to be found, because the laws cannot protect themselves, but rather must be maintained in force by a power, always and everywhere present, which steadfastly resists all that would attack the laws. Thus where the true laws of freedom in fact rule, their will must be the living will of the people. Laws of freedom are none other than laws of the strictest justice, that is, of rational equality. Thus, the spirit which gives these laws weight and duration must be just as far removed from the desire for domination that wishes to oppress as from the baseness which allows itself to be oppressed; and this spirit is the best, the noblest and strongest, which can hold sway over men.

Pure transcendental virtue, this rarest heavenly gift, is not our topic here, but rather the amount and strength of the good and great qualities of the understanding and the heart. The former, perhaps, is to be found even more often in an unhappy state, among all the horrors of corruption, than in a happy and virtuous one. One could, perhaps, see some similarity in the proportions between the external and internal goods of two such peoples—a thought that leads to many others, and cannot be developed here.

From this flows a truth of great significance: that the doctrine of happiness, of virtue, and of justice rests entirely on the theory of freedom, or if one prefers, on the theory of human ability. And so the opposite, a theory of slavery, of human inability, or of the power of the passions, would present a doctrine of human misery, of all the vices, of all abandonment of duties, misdeeds, and crimes. True freedom would thus be identical with virtue. Virtue, however, can dwell only in the human being himself, and its power can be replaced by no other power. The aim of formal laws is to substitute externally for the power of virtue and of freedom. Since formal laws are always related to and grounded on the opposite of both virtue and freedom, their history contains a history of human inability, which cannot be pondered enough. Xenophon maintained that the Spartan constitution alone had *virtue itself* as its aim. This much is certain; it was directed entirely at the suppression of those tendencies and the elimination of those objects which made civil laws necessary. It wanted to enforce customs and character, not just physical acts of commission or omission. But this is not to have *virtue itself* as an object, and Sparta was very far from that.[20] No constitution of a state can or should have virtue itself for an immediate object, because virtue never arises out of any particular external form.

This happens incessantly among men: they confuse effects with their causes, external characteristics with internal ones, symptoms are taken for the thing itself and its source. Good political laws are the effects of virtue

and wisdom, not their first cause. They are the effects of them only insofar as foolishness and vice are present which set themselves in opposition to virtue and wisdom. When foolishness and vice get the upper hand, the good laws lose their force, and others arise which are often more successful at resisting virtue and wisdom than the good laws were at resisting foolishness and vice. According to a prophet of this age, when madness becomes epidemic, it receives the name of reason. So it is with vice as well: when it becomes common, it steps into virtue's place. And then they both issue laws. The stronger rules everywhere—*but does not rule justly everywhere.*

Were it possible for some form or another to produce virtue and happiness, or even preserve it securely, then this would certainly have been accomplished first of all by the form of the true divine religion. It was, however, so little capable of this, and of resisting its misuse, that it was precisely the era in which this form was dominant—and indeed almost the only form of humanity, devouring all others—which surpassed all other ages in history in its horrors, and in the duration of these horrors. We also see how this happened. In order to secure the greatest imaginable good for man, or merely to prepare the way toward it, no means could be left untried. Hesitation seemed an absurdity and a sin to the pious zealots. It would be better to give way to folly, and make truth itself into foolishness; better to serve all the vices and even become their companion; to call on the aid of every charm, every seduction, every betrayal, and every compulsion. It began with the most honest intention, which only after a time, and never entirely, lowered itself to a mere pretext. And thus the letter of the truth became the letter of the most miserable nonsense, the holiest doctrine became a means of exterminating all virtue and even conscience itself; the guiding principle of happiness became a snare of corruption. What an example full of deep lessons for the inquisitive mind!

If, however, this hideous epoch is almost over, whom ought we to thank? Perhaps some new form, some coercive institution? By no means. Our thanks should be directed alone to that inner, invisible power which, if not in the forefront, was at least lying in wait everywhere in the world where good happened and evil had to make way for it: the ceaseless striving of reason. As incomplete as reason is in men, it is still the best he has, the only thing that truly helps and stands him in good stead. Whatever he should see outside its light, he will never glimpse; whatever he undertakes unguided by its help will never succeed. Can anyone become wise elsewhere than in the understanding [*Verstand*]; in the understanding that he himself has? Can he become happy outside his own heart?

Here the question arises: How can human society be aided, since it can neither exist without such an external form containing the means of coercion nor secure its welfare through this form?

The answer to this question has already been given.

That coercion without which the society cannot exist does not have as its object that which makes man *good*, but rather that which makes him *evil*; it has a *negative* rather than a *positive* purpose. This purpose can be preserved and secured through external form; and everything positive, virtue and happiness, then arise of themselves from their own source.

Therefore, we would be well advised never to attempt to bring about by force what cannot be forced; and, on the other hand, to use our unified strength to bring about what can and should be enforced.

However, this can be enforced among men: that no one shall have to suffer coercion by another, and it is the *only* thing that brings a *certain, universal, and immutable advantage.*

Open all the books of history. Was it a lack of riches, population, military force, and territory, which sank so many countries into the deepest misery, subjecting their members to every species of distress and disgrace?—On the contrary, it was the mad pursuit of these objects; *it was the lack of a strict, universal, unchanging law of justice, which made every other law an abomination.*

What made men so miserable everywhere? Was it ignorance and stupidity in and of itself; was it contrariness and laziness?—Far from it! It was the mistaken conclusions of wisdom, the errors of understanding, the delusions of wit, coupled with the impatience to act, with the violence of pursuing the aim of every passing moment and forcing it on the oppressed masses.

The unending history of all the evil with which the passions of rulers have everywhere poisoned the earth is hardly more horrible than the history of what has arisen from their best intentions. The union of the two presents a painting that could make infidels of weak souls.

The more one reads history, and the more thoroughly one reads it, the firmer the conviction grows that, as Spinoza says, the greatest foolishness is to expect from another what no one can obtain from himself—namely, that he repress his own passions in order to satisfy the passions of others; that he renounce lust, ambition, and greed in order to obtain and secure their objects for others—or to expect that that individual alone will be gripped by no passion, whose whole being is of such a nature that he, surrounded by the greatest temptations, must feel the greatest attraction to all the passions.[21]

Still another great man emphasizes this truth very pointedly in more than one place in his best work[22] and I gladly call on him in particular as a witness, because no one can honorably deny his clear unbiased understanding. "It should be noted," he says among other things (Book I, chapter 42), "how promptly the Decemvir Appius came to lose all his virtue and how little the impression of the best education was preserved among the noble young Romans who were gathered around him. One should observe among the second Decemvirate how Quintus Fabius, blinded by ambition, seduced by Appius, soon changed from the best man to the worst of all. All

legislators of republics and of monarchies should consider the number of examples of this sort and learn to restrain by all means the desires of men, so that none may have the slightest hope of sinning with impunity."[23]

However, this same great man maintains (Book I, chapter 9) that good laws could not be preserved under an unlimited government, and the matter is obvious, even without the preceding. Bad and foolish laws will then take their place. Foolish laws, which are not the immediate result of passions, and which often arise with good intentions from a will in error, by themselves give rise to enough bad consequences to be compared to any other plague on humankind, especially with respect to the length and the extent of their influence.

It is disgusting to hear how people sometimes weigh in the balance certain advantages in policy [*Polizei*], or some other minor matter against the dreadful consequences of the exercise of arbitrary power. Certainly here and there some good must arise from the worst things, indeed perhaps good of a *particular* kind. The good brought about by unrestricted domination is twice as noticeable, chiefly because it arises unexpectedly, quickly, and all at once. This charms the empty-headed. They no longer notice the evil which they have long seen daily, with which they were brought up, and from which hardly anything new can happen; they are used to it, but not used to the good. In contrast, where freedom reigns, all things take their time; which is not such a great misfortune. And then—without considering the immeasurable dangers in the moral realm which are bound up with any quick way of achieving results, especially where only one person is making decisions for all, while the cares of all must remain idle and mute; without mentioning the important advantage which, where many are allowed to care, to examine the case, and to make decisions, easily outweighs the disadvantages of slowness—there lies *immediately* in the matter an advantage of the greatest importance. Where power is not at once available for good purposes, other forces must be used and applied on a large scale to reach these goals. Every item that is under consideration is viewed from all sides, developed as far as possible, examined in all its relations, fought over, and rescued. It steps forth at the outset already armed with grounds of reason and persuasion: thereafter it must be able to withstand and repulse every attack, supported by patience, steadfastness, cleverness, and courage, until at last all doubt has been erased, all prejudice overcome, all hindrances of partisanship cleared from the path. Thus reflection is stimulated everywhere, insight communicated and sharpened, the whole person given the fullest education. Still more: in order to be heard and easily followed, everyone who seeks influence must be concerned about his good name; in the absence of any other power, he must seek to earn the reputation for uprightness and intelligence and the majesty of wisdom and virtue. When great qualities of soul and spirit arise more frequently among a people in

this way, so that the masses as well do not simply enjoy their fruits, but themselves think en masse, learn to take part in the whole, learn to prize things and to order them according to their worth, acquire generosity, a feeling for the rights of human nature, and heart, joy, and courage for these rights; if this is all tightly bound up with that which brings hesitation with it.... Oh, who would not happily wait then! Who would not happily do without a thousand unimportant things, bear with a thousand discomforts, and if he is a man, gladly encounter even the greatest dangers!

Where many people are directly engaged in the administration of the state, there arises—beyond the superior advantage that the best virtues and the best qualities of spirit are more frequently awakened and become the share of many men—something else, related more closely to the external welfare of a state, something which Machiavelli, who always focused only on this external welfare, placed in the strongest light. He remarks that states for the most part have fallen because the circumstances and the times had changed but their ways of doing things had not been altered accordingly. The autocrat cannot always be in harmony with his time, because this would require a multiplicity of spiritual gifts and mental characteristics that cannot be found in one man, and some of which directly contradict one another. The hesitant Fabius could not, like Scipio, want to rush to Africa, and had he been the ruler of Rome, Hannibal might easily have crushed it in the end.[24] In fact, however, the man required for each time stepped forward. Thus a state supported by many individuals can resist fate longer than a state ruled by the will of only one individual. For it is impossible for a person to renounce his character, to change his opinions and his way of thinking, to deny his principles and his prejudices, to transform his insights and experiences. In short, it is impossible for a person to be not what he is, but rather what the course of events at any time demands from him.

Plato has Socrates put this question to Adeimantus:[25]

> But what in heaven's name about business matters, the deals that men make with one another,... the payment of contracts that buyers and sellers make among themselves, or which concern hand-work; or the payment and exaction of any dues that may be needful in markets or harbors; that is, concerning all commercial laws, whether in the city or the market, can we bring ourselves to legislate about these and similar things, whatever their names may be?
>
> *Adeimantus:* Nay, 'twould not be fitting to dictate to good and honorable men. For most of the enactments that are needed about these things they will easily, I presume, discover.
>
> *Socrates:* Yes, my friend, provided God grants them the preservation of the principles of law that we have already discussed.
>
> *Adeimantus:* Failing that, they will pass their lives multiplying such petty laws and amending them in the expectation of obtaining what is best.
>
> *Socrates:* You mean that the life of such citizens will resemble that of men who

are sick, yet from intemperance are unwilling to abandon their unwholesome regimen.

Adeimantus: Precisely.

Socrates: They make the attempt in a most charming fashion. For with all their doctoring they accomplish nothing except to complicate and augment their maladies. And they are always hoping that someone will recommend a panacea that will restore their health.[26]

I doubt that anything wiser or of greater substance concerning the administration of government can be said than what Socrates and Adeimantus have spoken here. Everywhere vain cares and foolish wishes suppressed wisdom and sought to dominate; but it is only in our time that they have been permitted to construct a formal system for themselves, a system which protects every act of violence with an excuse and even wants to grant a right to dominate all rights and to deprive laws at will of their most unalterable intention. These cares and these wishes dissolve into the desire for luxurious pleasures. But that is the nature of passion, which it is not attached to the things themselves, but only to their image. Therefore it must always deceive itself, never capture what it seeks, and see all its means fail. We eagerly seek, not pleasure, not the true means to achieving it, but rather only their representation: wealth, still more its splendor, its glamour. And the century has, with respect to these things, fallen into a kind of superstition, which of all varieties of superstition is perhaps the worst. Indeed it has come to such a pass among us, with the esteem or the enthusiasm for wealth, that wealth must be feigned even where it does not exist, just as one used to feign virtue. It has come to the point where, just as once virtue, freedom, and honor counted above all else, wealth may demand every sacrifice. And where is justice to be found now? Where is moderation and wisdom? Where, in protection of rights, are spirit and concord? Where is fairness and true welfare?—Where is real abundance and peaceful possession?

No one understood this better than Thomas Hobbes, this serious thinker whom Leibniz himself honored for his profundity. He did not fail to notice that between contradictory immoderate desires no internal peace can ever be established and that passions can no more be integrated into a system of virtue and freedom than errors into a system of truth. Since he himself believed only in passions and physical drives, he could not teach others justice and virtue. He therefore was honest enough to deny justice and virtue, and did not attempt to derive them from things from which they do not follow. He left every nature pure in itself and the truth *undistorted.* He did not seek *to give evil a good reputation.* In this he was like Machiavelli in his *Prince,* which has been unjustly maligned, because he has given the *true* theory of the unrestricted dominance of a single ruler, and not a false and deceptive one. Could I distribute laurels, these are the men I would crown and wrest them from the heads of deceivers, hypocrites, or the shallow.

I hear more than one voice, asking me mockingly whether I believe that, in a state constructed according to my principles, men would no longer pursue the passions, but would rather pursue wisdom alone? And I answer very patiently: No, I do not believe this. But I do believe the following: that there is an infinite difference between not expressly healing men of their foolishness and expressly leading them to it; that there is an infinite difference between not freeing men from all misery and thrusting them into it by force.

Right at the beginning of this work I remarked that, as blind drives dominate men more than reason does, the help of certain passions in combating other passions is indispensable, but no passions are to be aroused for their own sake, in order to make their object the ultimate object of all wishes, to set it up as the goal of personal and public happiness. I have shown that where this occurs, despotism necessarily breaks in from all sides, that it has broken in everywhere and in every time, and that despotism can never give rise to anything good. I have, with respect to the necessity of despotism in this system, in the end referred to Thomas Hobbes who will leave no doubt in the minds of those still doubtful. Previously, however, it was demonstrated that in this system too, where despotism is neither to be avoided nor done without, it must thwart the intentions of all of its subjects to a greater or lesser degree, and the overwhelming majority in the most horrible way. For it is entirely impossible, given the relationship of virtue and truth to vice and error among men, that he who is permitted to use power to coerce others for their own good, will not far more often use that power to their disadvantage, even where, and indeed often in particular when, his intentions are good, since human foolishness far exceeds even human malice.

Therefore in a state established according to the principles of this treatise, even the passions of each individual member would be given much greater freedom than in other states, for here power would prevent nothing except violations of property, and all forces would be directed solely against lawless violence and arbitrary regulations. Reason and wisdom would have free rein here to the highest extent—not just because of the absence of restrictions, but rather because they, as already demonstrated, would be continually challenged by the most important objects to develop themselves in every way. Perfection is nowhere to be hoped for, for out of flawed material something flawless can never arise, and so even a human society such as the one we wish to see established, a society united exclusively *to protect the security of all rights through the fulfillment of all duties, without which these rights could not exist and could not be valid,* even such a society, the most perfect imaginable for men and the only one which is consistent with reason, would continually have to battle with very great evils. To overcome these evils and to perfect the happiness of men some general means would have to be found to improve their nature from the ground up, a means which only a fool would

seek to find among the things of this earth. But we would only be infinitely miserable, if we, *created as we are*, could succeed in finding peace and satisfaction here; and he is the greatest enemy of our race who will seduce or impel us into hoping and wishing for this.[27]

> The lot of a good man is to explain his thoughts freely. He who does not dare to keep his eyes on the two poles of human life, religion and government, is only a coward.
>
> Voltaire

NOTES

1. Book II, chap. 21 §47. Jacobi cites Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain* from Rudolph Eric Raspe's 1765 edition (*Oeuvres Philosophiques* [Amsterdam and Leipzig, 1765]).—TRANS.

2. Justinus Febronius was the pseudonym of Johann Nicolaus von Hontheim, auxiliary bishop of Trier, theologian, and historian. He defended the limitation of papal powers in his *De statu ecclesiae et legitima potestate Romani Pontificus* (1763, 1765).—TRANS.

3. Jacobi's discussion takes its point of departure from Johannes von Müller's tract *Reisen der Päpste* (1782), which was occasioned by Pius VI's journey to Vienna in the spring of 1782 in response to the Emperor Joseph II's educational and ecclesiastical reforms. Müller sent a copy of the book, which criticized the autocratic character of Joseph's reforms, to Jacobi in May 1782.—TRANS.

4. Johannes von Müller was Swiss.—TRANS.

5. Justus Möser was a leading conservative critic of enlightened despotism who saw the rationalist ideal of a state organized toward a single end as standing in contradiction to the true, organic character of society.—TRANS.

6. In 1779, Frederick the Great intervened in a legal case involving a miller named Arnold, who, in Frederick's judgment, had received unfair treatment at the hands of noble Prussian judges. Arnold maintained that he had been unable to pay rent on his mill to the lord of the manor on which it was situated because the carp pond of a neighboring manor had drawn off the water necessary to operate it. Frederick supported Arnold's efforts to sue his lord—who had seized and auctioned off the mill—and imprisoned not only the judges who had originally decided against Arnold's claim but also seven other judges who, under orders from Frederick, had studied Arnold's case but decided it had been properly settled in the local court.—TRANS.

7. Justus Möser, "Über die deutsche Sprache und Literatur" (1781). In the course of this response to Frederick's *De la littérature allemande*, Möser noted that few in Germany had seen the danger posed by Frederick's autocratic intervention into the administration of law in the Arnold case. For the relevant passage, see *Justus Mösers Sämtliche Werke* (Osnabrück, 1986), 3:73–74.—TRANS.

8. Justus Möser, "Von dem wichtigen Unterscheide des würklichen und förmlichen Rechts," in *Patriotische Phantasien* IV (*Justus Mösers Sämtliche Werke* VII:99–100). The parenthetical explanations were inserted by Jacobi.—TRANS.

9. *Leviathan*, Pt. I, Chap. XIII. [The parallel passage in the English version of Leviathan reads "Force, and fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues."—TRANS.]

10. The word "desire" [*Begierde*] is here employed in its original sense, which encompasses the highest and purest strivings of the soul, and in which "desire" stands in opposition to "disgust" [*Abscheu*]. In this sense, there is no desire which is not good in and for itself and in harmony with reason. Among the emotions [*Affecten*] (which must be distinguished from the passions, since not all emotions are passions) there are those that are in themselves evil, such as hate, envy, or arrogance, that also produce desires, but are not *original* desires.

11. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. [The preceding sentence is a paraphrase of Pt. V, Sec. III of the *Essay*, edited by Duncan Forbes (Edinburgh, 1966), 218.—TRANS.]

12. *Mémoires de Brandenbourg*. [Jacobi's reference to Frederick the Great's *Mémoires de Brandenbourg* is taken verbatim from Ferguson's text (Forbes edition, pp. 220—221).—TRANS.]

13. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Pt. V, sec. 3. [Forbes edition, p. 221.—TRANS.]

14. Jacobi is referring to the Dutch philosopher Frans Hemsterhuis (1721–1790). Hemsterhuis, in the 1772 work *Lettre sur l'homme et ses rapports*, which Jacobi cites, argued that the Platonic notion of Eros plays an analogous role in relations between human beings to that played by the power of attraction in the physical world. His work was admired by both Herder and Jacobi, who wrote Hemsterhuis a long letter in July 1784 that included a dialogue between Jacobi and Spinoza that was later incorporated into Jacobi's *Spinoza-Büchlein*.—TRANS.

15. *Lettre sur l'homme et ses rapports*, p. 157. See, in addition, Montesquieu in *L'esprit des Loix*, III:v, in comparison with the third section of this same book, where it says among other things: "The Greek statesmen [...] knew of no other support to rely upon than the support of virtue. Our statesmen talk only of manufacturing, of trade and commerce, of public revenues, of wealth, and even of luxury and pomp." [In the third section of the third book of *L'esprit des Loix*, Montesquieu argues that "virtue" is the principle on which democratic constitutions rest, while in the fifth section of the third book he argues that "honor" rather than "virtue" serves as the principle of monarchical constitutions.—TRANS.]

16. The image of a guardian who has not been appointed by a judge and who never allows his ward to come to maturity will later play an important role in Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" But for Jacobi, as for his friend Hamann, what is at issue here is less a matter of "self-incurred immaturity" than of "self-appointed guardianship."—TRANS.

17. "Deluded wretch, with never in his life a glimpse of even the shadow of the Good! And he says that he is doing all this for honor's sake! Where is there honor without moral good? And is it good to have an army without public authority, to seize Roman towns by way of opening the road to the mother city, to plan debt cancellations, recall of exiles, and a hundred other villainies 'all for that first of deities, Sole Power'?" Cicero, *Letters to Attitus*, Bk. VII, Letter XI (Bailey translation).

18. Eumaeus was Odysseus' faithful swineherd.—TRANS.

19. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Pt. VI, Sec. I. [Forbes edition, p. 241.—TRANS.]

20. One can read the judgment of a contemporary of Xenophon's on Sparta in the eighth book of the *Republic* of Plato. [Plato explicitly mentions the Spartan and Cretan constitutions as being those "which the many praise" at 544c; this is followed by a discussion of timocracy, the constitution based on the love of honor, from 545c to 550b. However, Jacobi's comments owe more to Ferguson's views, especially as expressed in the section "Of National Defense and Conquest," in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Forbes ed., pp. 146–147.—TRANS.]

21. *Tractatus politici* (not the *Theologico-politici*), Chap. VI §3. ["And it is surely folly to require of another what one can never obtain from one's self; I mean, that he should be more watchful for another's interest than his own, that he should be free from avarice, envy, and ambition, and so on; especially when he is one, who is subject daily to the strongest temptations of every passion." *Tractatus politici* VI:3 (Elwes translation).—TRANS.]

22. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di T. Livio.*

23. Jacobi's translation of Machiavelli's *Discourses* I:42 is rather free. In the Leslie Walker translation, the passage in question reads as follows: "It should also be noted too in the affair of the Decemviri how easily men are corrupted and in nature become transformed, however good they may be and however well taught. Consider, for instance, how the young men whom Appius chose as a bodyguard, soon became friends of tyranny for the sake of the small advantages which accrued; and how Quintus Fabius, one of the second Ten, though an excellent fellow, was after a while blinded by a little ambition and, under the evil influence of Appius, changed his good habits for bad and became like him. Due consideration of this will cause all legislators, whether in a republic or a kingdom, to be all the more ready to restrain human appetites and to deprive them of all hope of doing wrong with impunity."—TRANS.

24. Jacobi's analysis appears to have been taken from Machiavelli's discussion in the *Discourses* III:9, where he argues that while Fabius's tendency to proceed with caution was advantageous in holding Hannibal at bay after Hannibal's initial victories, "if Fabius had been king of Rome, he might easily have lost this war, since he was incapable of changing his methods according as circumstances changed. Since, however, he was born in a republic where there were diverse citizens with diverse dispositions, it came about that just as it had a Fabius, who was the best man to keep the war going when circumstances required this, so later it had Scipio at a time suited to its victorious consummation" (Walker translation).—TRANS.

25. In the fourth book of the *Republic.*

26. *Republic* 425c–426a; adapted from the Paul Shorey translation.—TRANS.

27. The first edition closed with a translation and annotated commentary on Bk. I, Chap. LVIII of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, which discusses why the people are wiser and more reliable than princes.—TRANS.